

# Boundless

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## ARTS & LIFE

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*continents  
and cultures*



Weizman and Kowch lift the painting for a *Free Press* photographer.

"How beautiful to hold an icon together of a person who brought unity," Taras Kowch, 56, says later. "When the rabbi came in and started talking about some of his experiences, I was shaking, thinking how hard it must have been for my grandfather and all others to live through those horrific times."

It's not every man that can say his grandfather is a saint, but Kowch can come close: Pope John Paul II beatified the elder Kowcz as an official martyr of the Catholic Church in 2001. He's now a single miracle short of sainthood.

At 11:30 this morning, Kowcz's legacy will be honoured at the Immaculate Conception Church's annual religious pilgrimage. But church organizer Darcia Senft believes that his story, rooted in Manitoba through a grandson, extends beyond religious boundaries.

To prove this point, Senft invited the Jewish Federation of Winnipeg to this morning's ceremony. The proposition caused a brief stir among her fellow parishioners.

"When someone pointed out that we'd need to get kosher food, the elder babas were stand-

ing there going, 'What's wrong with laughs Senft.

Old World cultures blend into the When Kowch was installed as the Immaculate Conception in 1998, he family's lore with him. But he was community already swimming in ting with the church itself.

Called the "prairie cathedral," th seven domes rise suddenly on the l sand-coloured walls incongruous v fields. Erected by parishioners, th life in 1930, and was completed 22 1943 blueprint apologizes for the d that the voluntary workforce was i farmers" subsisting on 10 to 60 ac "often very sandy."

What stands now is a testament i Ukrainian farmers' perseverance. was declared a provincial heritage and a national historic site in 2004 vived crumbling stairs (replaced i cost of \$100,000), primitive insulat Kowch to hold winter mass in the l babas tell me that the original wal with rags," says Senft), and a rash

ON a rainy Tuesday in northwest Winnipeg, a rabbi is holding court in the house of a priest.

It could be a set-up for a joke, but the mood here isn't quite jovial. Peretz Weizman, rabbi emeritus at the Etz Chayim Synagogue on Matheson Avenue, is here to recognize a long-ago good, a sacrifice made in 1944 by a priest named Emilian Kowcz.

The home belongs to Kowcz's grandson, Taras Kowch, a chaplain at Health Sciences Centre and the parish priest of Cook's Creek, about 40 kilometres northeast of Winnipeg.

Weizman is a Holocaust survivor. Kowcz's grandfather, Father Emilian, was a Ukrainian who baptized over 10,000 Jews during the Second World War. Conversion was not a motive: each person received a baptismal certificate bearing the priest's seal. For them, it was better than a passport.

For Kowcz, it was a smoking gun: After his ad hoc baptisms were discovered by the Nazis, he was shipped to the Majdanek concentration camp. His family lobbied for his release, but Kowcz demurred, writing, "yesterday they killed 50 persons here. If I were not here, who would help them endure? Except heaven this is the only place I would like to be." He died in the camp in 1944.

Weizman, 86, who made it out of the Jewish ghetto in Lodz and internment in a Polish concentration camp, says that survivors never expected anyone to help them. Sipping coffee with Kowcz's family, he says, honours the fact that someone did.

"I felt obligated to come and show my respect," Weizman tells Kowcz's family. "Because I know what it meant at that time to help a Jew."

Behind Weizman sits a shimmering portrait of Kowcz's grandfather. It's no mere painting: Drawn in the Byzantine style of Catholic iconography, the image will be blessed today at the Immaculate Conception Church in Kowcz's parish at Cook's Creek.

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